

July 14, 2019

TEXT: Luke 10:25–37

TITLE: Misdirected Conversations

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the few bible stories that has made it into our society's general knowledge. A Good Samaritan is someone who does a good deed for someone in need. We even have Good Samaritan laws to give legal protection to people who are just trying to help others out. We learn the parable in Sunday School and at summer Vacation Church School. Kids will often act out the various parts: someone playing the man, another pair being the mean robbers, two people being the priest and Levite who avoid the victim, and one person being the Good Samaritan—pantomiming helping the man up, dressing his wounds, putting him on a donkey, getting him safely settled in a nearby Holiday Inn (or some other hotel chain).

It's a great little drama because we can identify with all the roles. At times we've felt hurt, abandoned and dependent on the kindness of strangers. Sometimes we've been able to help someone out—going out of our way to make sure she or he was taken care of. And sometimes, sadly, we have been the person who has not stopped—who averted our gaze, who crossed to the other side, who gave our car some gas and simply kept on driving. It's a teaching parable, with the Good Samaritan presented as a moral example we are called to imitate. It even ends with Jesus saying "Go and do likewise." Pretty straightforward.

But what is less often noticed is how this whole subject was raised in the first place. This wasn't a case of Jesus walking along with his disciples, stopping in the shade of a tree and saying, "Let me tell you a story." No, the parable arose from a conversation with a critic—a lawyer, an expert in religious law, who was likely trying to discredit this un-credentialed, wandering rabbi from Nazareth. This man boldly asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life. Now, the lawyer was already barking up the wrong tree because eternal life is not something you inherit. It's not a contract that you fulfill by meeting the requirements. It is a gift—it is a continuation of a relationship—it is a God-thing, mysterious and loving and generously offered to more folks than any of else can imagine.

Nonetheless, the wise guy asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" No lawyers ask a question that they don't already know the answer to, so in this case Jesus wisely responds, "You tell me. What does Jewish law say about this?" The man replies, "Love God with your heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus nods and says, "You're right. Do this and live." But the lawyer had already taken one step in a wrong direction. He'd already treated eternal life like a contract you fulfill. So next he takes a second step fully off the path of righteousness. "Teacher," he says, "be more precise. Who is my neighbor?" In effect, he asks Jesus to narrow down whom we have to be nice to. It's as if he said, "I'm a busy man and there are a bunch of folks I can't be bothered with."

In that moment, the conversation got woefully misdirected. What started with “eternal life,” loving God and those around us generously shifted into a deposition about who precisely we had to be nice to. We love to redirect conversations. One spouse asks whether an outfit makes him or her look fat and the other person says, “I can’t hear you, but hey, how about we go to that new Italian restaurant tonight?” A pastor shakes hands at the sanctuary door and says, “How’d you like the sermon?” to which the church member nervously coughs, says “Fine, but hey, do you think the Pirates will ever get their pitching straightened out?”

The lawyer misdirected the conversation with Jesus. He moved it away from love and eternal life and shifted it towards self-righteousness and whom it was permissible to exclude from this whole religious business. Jesus could have allowed this to happen and gotten into a debate with him about who fit within the category of neighbor. But Jesus didn’t do that. And there’s a lot to learn from the choices Jesus made that day.

Stop for a moment and name for yourself some positive human qualities, things like patience and kindness. When you think about it, most of our best qualities are relational—they reside not so much within us, but in the space between us and others. John Pavlovitz is a pastor who writes a popular blog called “Stuff That Needs to be Said.” In a recent book he noted this relational quality in human virtues. He said, “Compassion needs another’s story to invest in and move toward. Generosity requires a recipient to be extended to. Humor is magnified when it is shared. Our gifts and abilities are, by their nature, meant to be relational.”¹

Jesus knew that the question about eternal life has an answer that is relational, not contractual: Love God with your heart, mind and soul—love your neighbor as yourself. These are relational qualities. They aren’t easy to measure and they certainly can’t be doled out like precise ingredients in a spiritual recipe. Jesus knew the lawyer had misdirected the conversation. So he chose to redirect it back to where it needed to be. Instead of defining who our neighbors are—to whom we need to be nice, kind, and caring—Jesus talked about what it means to be a neighbor to someone else. In a surprising turn of events, Jesus insisted defining “neighbors” is not about others, but is about us.

I love surprising turns like this. We just returned from a family vacation and while we were traveling, I read a fun book called Hidden America by Jeanne Marie Laskas. Laskas actually lives south of here and teaches at Pitt University. She intentionally spent time with people in professions we almost never think about: men working on oil rigs, female truck drivers, migrant workers picking blueberries in Maine, and guys driving huge bulldozers in a California landfill. On her first visit to a coal mine not far from here, she rode an elevator down 500 feet. When the doors opened, what color do you think she saw? White. Here she was in a black coal mine, but everywhere she looked, she only saw ‘white.’ That’s because every inch of exposed coal was intentionally coated with powdered limestone, a fire retardant dust that prevents spontaneous combustion. It was not what she expected at all, but it was definitely what was needed down in that dark mine.²

White walls instead of coal black. Surprising. Back to the Good Samaritan story: Answering the question “Who is my neighbor?” involved flipping the conversation from defining the neighbor as the other we may or may not help to defining neighborliness as a quality we ourselves may or may not possess. It’s not about the other person; it is about us. Surprising—perhaps a little unsettling, yet exceedingly relevant for the issues we are facing as a nation today. For example, a lot of attention is being focused on how people – families, children—are being treated in immigration facilities along our southern border. So often the conversation is misdirected to focus on the people fleeing their homes in Central America. Like the lawyer in the parable, people try to dissect who is truly our neighbor—who is worthy of being admitted in, worthy of Green cards and citizenship, worthy of even basic necessities such as a shower, a blanket, or allowing children to be kept with their parents. That’s how this conversation has been misdirected. But in truth, the real conversation about immigration should focus on what our policies say about us. Ultimately it has never truly been about them; it’s always been a question about us—about our priorities, our understanding of what it means to be in relationships, to profess Christian values and to have a commitment to be neighbors after the example of the Good Samaritan.

There’s a wonderful quote that says, “There is nothing noble in being superior to your fellow man; true nobility is being superior to your former self.”³ Hopefully the lawyer learned the truth in those words after his conversation with Jesus. Hopefully we too can accept this wisdom and apply it in our own lives—to show mercy like the Good Samaritan; to worry less about who is our neighbor and focus more about whether we are being neighborly and faithful. If we truly take this parable’s redirected conversation to heart, and if we honestly strive to heed Jesus’ words—“Go and do likewise”—then we will already be living the answer to the question “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ John Pavlovitz, [Hope and Other Superpowers](#), 2018, p. 202.

² Jeanne Marie Laskas, [Hidden America](#), 2012, p. 21.

³ Commonly attributed to a 1963 posthumous essay in *Playboy* by Ernest Hemingway. Also attributed to a lecture by W. L. Sheldon in 1897.